

Shortgrassers Look Forward To June, End Of Bitterweed Season

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MERTZON — Mid-January is a turning point on the Shortgrass calendar. All the ranchers know that from then on the severest challenges can be faced without fear of losing anything but their capital and liquid assets.

The whole countryside is refreshed. Boots are pulled on with great vigor. Pesky uncertainties are exchanged for harmless realities, like the taxes on cowbell clappers and trash barrels.

Bitterweed sheepmen, in particular, welcome the date. Old hands at the battle of the toxic weed rejoice as they can see that only six more months of the killing season remains. Veterans of the poisoned rangelands look forward to the prospect of a steady, controlled loss instead of the wild, unpredictable one that characterizes the opening days of the annual kill.

In February, as you may know, the weed isn't so bad. Sheep addiction to it continues until the warmer months, the death loss is more apt to stem from side reactions. I speak of such illnesses as the mortal step-a-day pneumonia, or the worrisome and fatal stumbling-and-falling fever. Actual bitterweed poisoning is then forced into a secondary role, and the woolies linger around until about two weeks before shearing. The two latter blights need not be critical; the ranch and his staff can, by turning the corral systems into outdoor hospitals, keep 65 percent of the flock on their feet. In unusually mild winters, some wool and a few lambs can be harvested from the top ends.

An outsider would be amazed at the amount of product that can be derived from an old ewe that has purposely flirted with self destruction all winter long.

Provided proper care, the lamb crop might shoot right on up to the high 30 percent bracket. If wool slippage is controlled by antibiotics, yield may easily reach half that of health ewes.

Don't ever believe that bitterweeded sheep don't return some money. The dead wool alone will offset corral depreciation costs, and I've seen the tax advantage run into large figures.

Scientific range conservation practices for the best solution for bitterweed control. First, the rangeland should be rested for the life span of three generations of people. Then, all it takes to clean the ground is a routine program of spraying and pulling the scattering of weed that remains.

The entire process should not take over \$120 per acre and about that many years to complete.

Ranch rotation is another good method. Under this program, the rancher rotates to other parts of the country. He never again suffers from bitterweed. Huge cats or deadly viruses may feast on his herds, but bitterweed as he knew it back home ceases to be a problem.

Of all the tactics now in use, running straight cattle is most popular. Households with mistresses who can make a living with a needle and thread or washboard and iron have had the best luck under this system. However, considering the financial return from a one-product outfit, the sewing and washing business should be underway before the changeover is made.

Spirits are high today in the Shortgrass Country. Feed wagons are scattering cake on frozen ground. At the worst, the threat from bitterweed will end by June. The day will never come when we can't hold out that long.